

The Cultural Impact of British Film

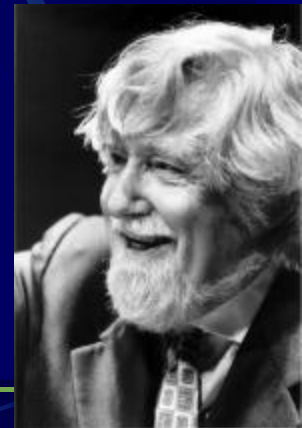
1946 - 2006

by Narval/Birkbeck
College/MCG

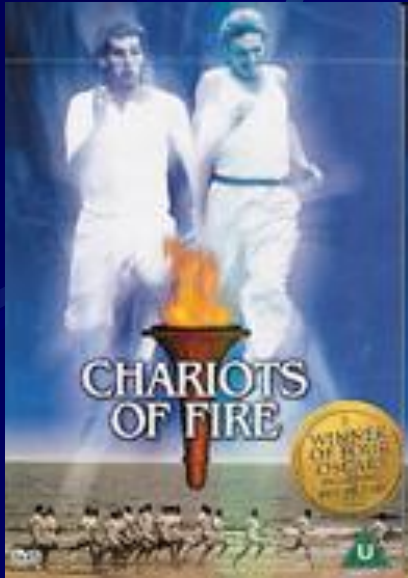


And what do we mean by **culture**?

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined culture as ‘stories we tell ourselves about ourselves’. Often they tell not so much how we are, but how we’d like to be – and also how we would not like to be...



From our samples and case studies, we show how films have different phases of impact – helped by the explosion of new platforms and web-based media



The screenshot shows the IMDb page for the movie 'Chariots of Fire' (1981). The page includes a navigation bar with categories like 'NOW PLAYING', 'MOVIE / TV NEWS', 'MY MOVIES', 'DVD & BLU-RAY™', 'IMDb TV', and 'MESSAGE BOARDS'. Below the navigation bar is a search bar and a list of links including 'Home', 'Top Movies', 'Photos', 'Independent Film', 'GameBase', and 'Browse'. The main content area features the movie title 'Chariots of Fire (1981)' with a link to 'More at IMDb Pro'. Below the title are sections for 'Photos' (with a link to 'see all 39 | slideshow') and 'Videos' (with a 'Trailer' link). The 'Overview' section displays a 'User Rating' of 7.3/10 based on 13,080 votes, which is circled in red. There are also links for 'Own the rights?' and 'Buy it at Amazon'.

How do films create lasting cultural impact?

Censorship and notoriety



'A Clockwork Orange was in the mind of a boy aged 16 who beat an elderly tramp to death, it was alleged at Oxford Crown Court yesterday'
The Times, 4 July 1973

Films can catch the national mood and become time capsules – 'zeitgeist moments'



Key impact findings

- Film has been a key arena for projecting and debating British values and identity – at home and globally
- This is the case both incrementally and in standout films (*Chariots of Fire, Henry V, Full Monty, Bend It Like Beckham, etc*)
- Sample analysis shows a majority of critically approved British films challenge traditional British values
- However, random sample reveal a majority of films which reinforce those values

From stereotypes to self-expression

- British cinema tradition of London studio-based films with stereotypes of regional characters
- Significant cultural impact of these films on regional cultures themselves (*Whisky Galore* in Scottish Top Ten)
- Post-war: only regional form of self-expression through film was the social/industrial documentary (the Grierson tradition)
- UK nations and regions have moved slowly towards self-representation through film – chequered course

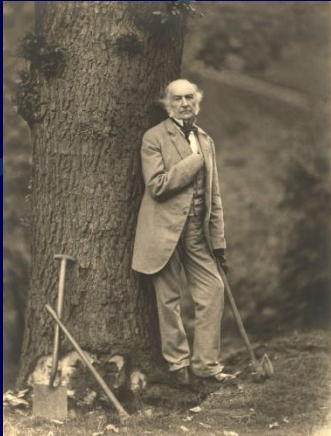
Cultural impact of regional films

- Late 50s-early 60s: a small number of 'New Wave' films destroyed old stereotypes of Northern English cultures - the films had considerable commercial and cultural impact (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Taste of Honey* etc)
- Cultural impact amplified by shock value echoed in print media – films became vehicles for cultural debate
- New Wave films revitalised British social realist genre which continued to evolve over the next decades – continuing cultural success of the genre (e.g. Alan Clarke, Shane Meadows)

Cultural impact of films from UK nations

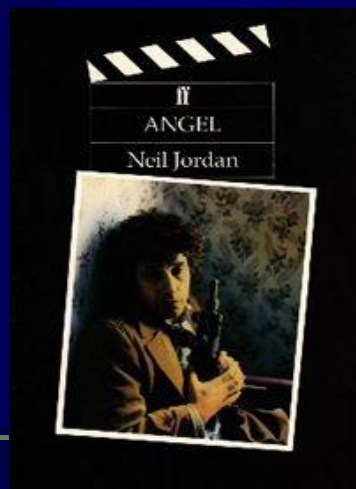
- Films from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have had very different pathways towards cultural impact
- Scotland's path to self-representation went through pioneering *auteurs* to reach temporary critical mass in mid-90s (*Trainspotting*, *Braveheart*, *Orphans*)
- Northern Irish 'Troubles' overshadowed local cinema but controversial hits (*In The Name of The Father*, *The Crying Game*) drew episodic world attention to NI
- Welsh language politics both an asset and a liability in the determination of cultural impact (*Hedwynn*)

Representing Northern Ireland



Representing the Troubles in the 80s

	IMDb rating	
Maeve (Pat Murphy, 1982)	6.4/10	<u>9 votes</u>
Angel (Neil Jordan, 1982)	6.3/10	<u>311 votes</u>
Cal (Pat O'Connor, 1984)	6.8/10	<u>690 votes</u>
A Prayer for the Dying (Mike Hodges, 1987)	6.2/10	<u>1,676 votes</u>
Hidden Agenda (Ken Loach, 1990)	7.0/10	<u>1,178 votes</u>
December Bride (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1991)	6.9/10	<u>184 votes</u>



Then, in the 90s...

The Crying Game (Neil Jordan, 1992) **7.3/10** [20,764 votes](#)

In the Name of the Father (Jim Sheridan, 1993) **8.0/10** [26,663 votes](#)



More recently, powerful films have returned us to the physical horror of the Troubles



Bloody Sunday (Paul Greengrass, 2002)
7.8/10 [8,492 votes](#)

Hunger (Steve McQueen, 2008) 7.6/10 [7,789 votes](#)



Representing Northern Ireland: some discussion points

- Hollywood reinforced the image of 'romantic Ireland', largely ignoring the North. But *Odd Man Out* created a romantic 'noir' vision of Belfast and the IRA.
- 70s documentaries portrayed sectarian strife as a Civil Rights struggle.
- *Angel* marked a new departure in portraying Northern Ireland - 'existential' rather than political - and Jordan continues to nuance his treatment of outsiders seeking to escape the dichotomies of Irish tradition.
- *Hidden Agenda* and *In The Name of the Father* delivered powerful critiques of British justice and policy in Northern Ireland, to a wide international audience.
- *Bloody Sunday* and *Hunger* offered a 'documentary' approach to some of the most notorious events of the recent Troubles – with greater impact?
- Have censorship and self-censorship limited the cultural impact of films about Northern Ireland, restricting their production and distribution?

Cultural impact abroad

- Upscale audiences in Europe identify 'British' film with low-budget social realist drama or comedies – steady audience for those films
- Enduring success of the British film *auteurs* such as Loach, Leigh, Chadha – British 'branding' effect amongst the cinephile audience (EU and Mid-East)
- In the US common language both dilutes and enhances cultural impact – mainstream hits not perceived as 'British', while films with strong UK regional identity often considered 'difficult'

Film policy and cultural impact

- From the 1980s broadcasting policy has played a major role in maintaining an economic and cultural engine for British cinema
- Broadcasters – especially Channel 4 – became the film industry's new domestic partner after theatrical decline had brought traditional film financing into free fall
- Deliberate policy of empowering a cinema of, and about, Britain and its social/cultural mutations
- Cultural impact amplified through use of both theatrical release and broadcast TV premieres

British film and cultural impact

Looking ahead

- British cinema's cultural impact now has multiple pathways through multiplication of media outlets
- New factors such as digital access and democratised discourses on film (fan sites, blogosphere, etc) are a vital contemporary dimension for the extension of cultural impact
- New media, DVD re-issues, digital re-mastering and broadband communities also a key factor in revitalizing interest in UK film heritage

British film and cultural impact

Looking ahead

- Consequences of these new modes of access/exchange and de-centralised discourses will be to extend the *long tail* of cultural impact
- Opportunity for public policy to plan for and incentivise these effects through education, training and new forms of 'distribution' funding
- In particular, public policy could help popularise UK film heritage through measures aimed at education

‘It may be in the cultural particularities of people — in their oddities — that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found.’

Clifford Geertz